

Does Style Matter in Worshipping God?

Nathaniel B Parker

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### Introduction

One war in history that has continually been fought through the ages without end is the church “worship war”. Pastors, theologians, and ministry and worship leaders continue to battle for the definition of biblical worship. John MacArthur has rightly cautioned: “Much that transpires in the church today under the name ‘worship’ is unacceptable to God...God has designed worship to be honor and adoration directed to Himself...The church needs to return to the basic essence of true worship and not be distracted by activities that are void of honor and adoration of God.”<sup>1</sup> How does one determine the biblical definition of true worship of God? And does the style of worship matter in worshipping God biblically? The answer to these questions will be presented in this paper through an examination of various scholars’ views concerning worship.

### Gary Reimers: Worship Style Does Matter to God

Gary Reimers has written a concise, yet deep treatment on worshipping God in his book *The Glory Due His Name: What God Says About Worship*. The goal of Reimers is to present a biblical exposition on the subject of worship and how to practically apply such an exposition to the church. His ultimate conclusion is that worship style does matter to God, and there are both God-ordained and forbidden styles of worship as presented throughout Scripture.

He begins his treatment on the worship of God by reminding readers that worship leaders are not to focus on worship styles that individuals wish, but to focus on the worship style that honors God and gives Him the glory and honor due Him. Reimers expounds on Psalm 135 as the biblical focus of worship on God. Reimers summarizes his emphasis on worship being focused on God by saying: “Worship is an event where God should be the center of attention and the

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<sup>1</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *MacArthur Pastor’s Library on Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 189.

guest of honor. To accomplish that goal, churches should be designing their worship services with the focus on Him.”<sup>2</sup> He encourages readers to look beyond asking “Did you (or I) get anything out of the service today?” to shift the question to “Did God get anything out of your (or my) worship today?”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to mention that the worshipers attending the church service are not the audience and those on the platform are not the performers. God is the audience, and everyone in the church service is to participate in the worship of God.<sup>4</sup>

Reimers proceeds to lay a foundation on the essence of biblical worship of God, particularly with an exposition on the woman at the well passage in John 4. He focuses his discussion on John 4:23-24 in reference to worshipping God in spirit and in truth. The spirit of the individual is required to worship God in order for the worship not to become a mere passive ritual. The heart of the worshiper must be right with God. Truth is also required in order to worship God in line with the Scripture’s teaching concerning biblical worship.<sup>5</sup>

Once the foundation of the essence of worship has been laid, Reimers transitions into the elements of biblical worship to God. Reimers lists five elements that comprise biblical worship: preparation, praise, prayer, presentation, and preaching. The rest of his discussion elaborates on these five elements. Reimers highlights the importance of preparation in worship as part of true worship of God, allowing worshipers to prepare their hearts to worship God.<sup>6</sup> Balancing Psalm 100 and New Testament passages from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 Reimers proceeds with a focus on the importance of praise in the worship of God, primarily emphasizing singing to God. In terms of biblically-sound singing to God Reimers makes the following comment:

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Reimers, *The Glory Due His Name: What God Says About Worship* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2009), 5–6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11–13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 20–21.

What is clear is that the content of all three categories reflects the truths of God's Word, with the result that the participants both convey and receive biblical instruction and exhortation. The lyrics, then, must undergo careful scrutiny to ensure that each song is not only doctrinally valid but valuable as a teaching tool. That is, if a particular song says something true but is not helpful toward edification, it would not pass the test. This might eliminate many of the popular "praise choruses" that sometimes simply repeat trite phrases over and over again....Paul's emphasis strikes at the heart of much contemporary worship, where our egocentric culture has infiltrated the church. People want to be entertained, and many churches are willing to accommodate them, performing music that pleases their audience. That focus is unbiblical because true worship is all about God. When the goal is to honor God rather than please man, the musical style of worship will portray a commitment to excellence and beauty that fully supports the rich truths of lyrics chosen for their integrity and biblical accuracy. According to Scripture, this is what God expects.<sup>7</sup>

Reimers continues his tour through the elements of biblical worship by next examining prayer. Most of his exposition on prayer centers around the Lord's Prayer as the model prayer for biblical worship. While Reimers does not require (nor object to) one praying the Lord's Prayer verbatim in worship services, he outlines how the Lord's Prayer serves as the manner by which worshipers should pray to God.<sup>8</sup> Reimers concludes his discussion on the elements of worship by focusing on the importance of preaching in the worship of God. He calls preachers to forsake the mere "motivational talks" of modern preaching and return to solid biblical exposition that includes: reading scripture, teaching and explaining the interpretation of Scripture, and exhorting the application of Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

Reimers transitions his discussion from the elements of biblical worship to what he refers to as the dangers of deviant worship. He rejects the discussion that worship style does not matter in worshipping God. He associates discussion on worship style not mattering to God as one that

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<sup>7</sup> Reimers, 22–27.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28–29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 43–47.

has surfaced from the church marketing movement. He proceeds to examine Scripture to call worshipers back to the biblical definition of worship.<sup>10</sup>

The first exposition presented by Reimers concerning the dangers of deviant worship is Exodus 20:3-5 on the first and second commandments of the Ten Commandments. According to Reimers, not only are we to ensure we worship the true God (the first commandment), but we are to worship God in the true manner (the second commandment).<sup>11</sup> He goes into illustrate this through the incident of the golden calf on how the nation of Israel stooped to a deviant form of worshipping God through their idolatry.<sup>12</sup> Another illustration on deviant worship by Reimers is from Nadab and Abihu's use of a variant offering of incense in Leviticus 10:1-3. Reimers refers to this deviation of worship as worship focused on innovation.<sup>13</sup> He parallels this incident to the church marketing movement's use of "innovative styles" and cautions worshipers against adhering to this form of what he refers to as deviant worship.<sup>14</sup> The other parallel to modern worship presented by Reimers is the marriage of Rock music with Christian wording (Christian Rock). Reimers boldly proclaims the following concerning Rock music: "Rock music has become one of the primary means by which the world worships the gods of illicit sex, drugs, and rebellion."<sup>15</sup> He cautions that marrying Christian wording with Rock music is worship that conforms to the world, a worship that is contrary to Scripture (Romans 12:2).

Another avenue of deviant worship as outlined by Reimers is worship marketed for the sake of convenience. His exposition from the Old Testament is on the golden calves as erected by

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<sup>10</sup>. Reimers, 51–52.

<sup>11</sup>. Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>12</sup>. Ibid., 72–74.

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., 74–76.

<sup>14</sup>. Ibid., 77.

<sup>15</sup>. Ibid., 78–81.

Jeroboam as a means to allow the Israelites a more convenient form of worshipping God without traveling to the temple in Judah.<sup>16</sup> He parallels this deviant form of worship to the church marketing movement that allows worshipers to find the most convenient worship service that “fits” their lifestyle versus worship that truly honors God.<sup>17</sup>

The final form of deviant worship as discussed by Reimers is worshipping God with the right method but with the wrong heart. Reimers focuses on Cain in Genesis 3 as the biblical foundation of this discussion.<sup>18</sup> He discusses how Cain worshipped God with the wrong heart, which is why his sacrifice to God was unacceptable to God. He also expounds how Saul’s partial disobedience of sparing animals that were commanded by God to be slaughtered and offering up these animals to God as a sacrifice is another deviant form of worshipping God with the wrong heart.<sup>19</sup>

Reimers passionately defends that worship style matters to God. He expounds upon a range of Scripture passages to outline the essence and elements of worship, culminating in cautioning against the pitfalls of deviant worship. Reimers concludes his work by saying: “Nothing is more important than worship, either now or in eternity”.<sup>20</sup>

### **John Piper: Worship Style Does Not Matter to God**

John Piper touches on the subject of worship in his book on leadership, *Brothers, We are Not Professionals*. John Piper agrees with Dr. Reimers’ view concerning the essence of biblical worship and worshipping God with the right heart. Where Piper varies with Dr. Reimers is in his

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<sup>16</sup>. Reimers, 81–84.

<sup>17</sup>. Ibid., 84–87.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid., 88–89.

<sup>19</sup>. Ibid., 90–92.

<sup>20</sup>. Ibid., 100.

emphasis on the essence of worship while underscoring the style (what he refers to as form) does not matter to God. Piper begins his chapter on worship by saying:

“Few of us have had or will have the luxury of escaping the “worship wars.” The “wars” are usually waged over forms and styles, not over the essence of what worship is. But leading your people into the essence is all-important. So I want to call you to put your focus and energies in the most fruitful place for the glory of God. Focus on the essence, not the form.”<sup>21</sup>

Piper’s thesis on worship styles (forms) centers on what Piper refers to as the New Testament’s silence on worship as an outward form, focusing instead mostly on the inward heart of the worshiper. He continues that the New Testament never refers to the gathering together of the church as “worship”. The reason for this, according to Piper, is that the word for “worship” used in Scripture implies worshipping directly in the physical presence of Jesus Christ. Piper states it this way: “ But in the age between the ascension and the second coming Christ is not visibly here to worship. Therefore, worship is radically internalized and delocalized.”<sup>22</sup>

Like Reimers, Piper also expounds on John 4 in his discussion, yet unlike Reimers, Piper focuses the discussion of worship more on the absence of physical location in terms of worship. Piper puts it this way: “Inner spiritual reality replaces geographic locality.”<sup>23</sup> Piper continues this thinking through his exposition of Paul’s epistles in the New Testament when he says: “So even when Paul uses an Old Testament word for worship, he takes pains to let us know that what he has in mind is not mainly a localized or external event of worship but an internal, spiritual experience—so much so that he sees all of life and ministry as an expression of that inner experience of worship.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>. John Piper, *Brothers, We Are not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 229–30.

<sup>22</sup>. Ibid., 230–31.

<sup>23</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>. Ibid., 231.

Piper's main emphasis on biblical worship is to examine the heart of the worshiper, while continually stressing that worship is inward and not outward. He refers to worship as the "magnifying of God".<sup>25</sup> He considers worship to be when the worshiper cherishes and is satisfied in Christ. Piper words it this way: "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."<sup>26</sup> He believes that Scripture only presents worshipers with the essence of biblical worship. It is up to the worshipers to determine the style and form of worshipping God. Unlike Reimers, Piper believes the worshiper receives from God versus giving to God in the worship service (while cautioning against receiving entertainment). Piper words this view this way: "It will transform your pastoral leadership in worship if you teach your people that the basic attitude of worship on Sunday morning is not to come with your hands full to give to God but with your hands empty to receive from God. And what you receive in worship is God, not entertainment. Teach them that they ought to come hungry for God."<sup>27</sup>

Piper passionately defends the essence of worship as the focus of biblical worship and not the worship style that matters to God. He concludes his chapter by saying: "Therefore, brothers, focus on the essence of worship, not on the form."<sup>28</sup>

### **Paul Basden: All Worship Styles Matter to God**

Paul Basden is the general editor for the *Zondervan Counterpoints Series* volume on *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: Six Views*. Basden begins his discussion on biblical worship by saying: "Worship is inherently theological. It is primarily about God. Specifically, it is about how Christ-followers offer to God their love, gratitude, and praise."<sup>29</sup> His definition of biblical

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<sup>25</sup>. Piper, 233–34.

<sup>26</sup>. Ibid., 235.

<sup>27</sup>. Ibid., 236–41.

<sup>28</sup>. Ibid., 241–43.

<sup>29</sup>. Paul A. Basden, ed., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: Six Views*, Zondervan



worship concludes that this is no ideal, and that virtually, all worship styles matter to God. He words it this way: “There is no ideal definition of worship. No one has defined worship so completely as to plumb the depths of this divine–human encounter.”<sup>30</sup> He summarizes biblical worship in light of Scriptures by stating: “The Old Testament reveals varying emphases in worship in different periods in Israel’s history, while the New Testament unveils varying approaches to worship based on different locations and cultures.”<sup>31</sup> His conclusion is that there is no particular style of worship that is the biblical form of worship. All styles are acceptable to God concerning worship. He words his conclusion this way: “It has ever been the case that worship is multiform, not uniform. God is not threatened by this reality — he ordained it; he expects it; he glories in it.”<sup>32</sup>

Ironically, while Basden’s essay essentially concludes, in agreement with Piper, that worship style does not matter to God (or more rightly stated, all worship styles matter to God), the worship discussion transitions to a series of six worship leaders each offering a defense for their preferred style of worshipping God. Each contend that their worship style of God is the most biblical form of worshipping God. The first scholar is Paul Zahl in his defense of formal-liturgical worship. Zahl emphasizes the importance of “biblical verticality” in worship. He rejects the overall spontaneity as seen some other forms of worship.<sup>33</sup> Zahl challenges readers to first look upward to God in their worship to God, which is best illustrated by formal-liturgical worship according to Zahl.<sup>34</sup> He concludes by grounding vertical worship in the truth of Scripture alone, hearkening back to worship in spirit and in truth.<sup>35</sup>

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Counterpoints Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 12.

<sup>30</sup>. Ibid., 13.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid., 14–15.

<sup>32</sup>. Ibid., 19.

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid., 23.

Harold Best proceeds to defend traditional hymn-based worship as the biblical style of worshipping God. Best emphasizes that the real worship war is a spiritual one not one between believers. He states it this way: “There is only one worship war, and it is between God and Satan, each the supreme object of someone’s worship, either redeemed or lost.”<sup>36</sup> Best expounds on the discussion that we were created in a state already worshipping God: “we were created worshipping — already at worship, already outpouring to the eternally continuous Outpourer, God himself”.<sup>37</sup> As a result of the fall, we continued worshipping, but we deflected our worship to the wrong person. Best words it as such: “We fell. But this did not stop our worship and our outpouring. Rather, we exchanged gods and continued our worship.”<sup>38</sup> Best calls believers to return to what he refers to as true worship grounded in Jesus Christ. He defines true worship this way:

True worship — that is, godly and Christ-centered worship — is the redemption and washing clean of this continuum. It comes into being, not out of nothing, not out of the blue, but out of a divine work in a lost and fallen heart. It comes only when we, as continuous but inauthentic worshipers, give ourselves to Christ, who alone can take our falsified condition, turn it right side up, wash it in his blood, and direct it to his glory throughout the remainder of time and into the infinite arrivings of the eternities to come.<sup>39</sup>

Best stresses that the use of song texts, hymnbooks, and the organ are the ideal of worshipping God. All three combine to allow one to truly take the doctrine learned through the reading of Scripture and sing it back to God when praising and worshipping God.<sup>40</sup> Best also

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<sup>34</sup>. Basden, 24.

<sup>35</sup>. Ibid., 25–26.

<sup>36</sup>. Ibid., 60–61.

<sup>37</sup>. Ibid., 61.

<sup>38</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>. Ibid., 65–66.

emphasizes the hymnbook to serve as a devotional element to God in one's personal devotional time.<sup>41</sup> The use of the hymnbook is central in Best's discussion and defense of traditional worship.

Joe Horness transitions the discussion by defending contemporary worship. While Horness certainly believes in the holiness of God as seen through the Old Testament, he also highly emphasizes the relational aspect of God. in his discussion on worship<sup>42</sup> Horness agrees with Piper's view concerning the essence of worship and quotes Piper in his essay: "We cannot honor God if our hearts are far from Him. The engagement of the heart in worship is the coming alive of the feelings and emotions and affections of the heart. Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead."<sup>43</sup> Like Piper, Horness believes that worship is primarily a matter of the heart, regardless of style or form.<sup>44</sup>

Don Williams defends charismatic worship in his discussion on worship. He begins by outlining the history of the charismatic revival throughout church history.<sup>45</sup> His emphasis on worship is what he refers to as both God-centered and deeply spiritual.<sup>46</sup> Williams presents that the goal in biblical worship is a return to an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and what he refers to as "Spirit-led worship".<sup>47</sup> His discussion emphasizes the various charismatic or Pentecostal elements found in worship services.

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<sup>41</sup>. Basden, 67–70.

<sup>42</sup>. Ibid., 99.

<sup>43</sup>. Ibid., 101.

<sup>44</sup>. Ibid., 102.

<sup>45</sup>. Ibid., 139.

<sup>46</sup>. Ibid., 143.

<sup>47</sup>. Ibid., 145–47.

Robert Webber offers a defense of “blended worship” in his treatment on worship. His thesis concerning “blended worship” is as follows: “In brief, blended worship is a synthesis of the liturgical and contemporary worship renewal movements of the twentieth century.”<sup>48</sup> Webber emphasizes what he refers to as “thematic worship” on the various themes of God, incorporating both traditional and contemporary elements into the worship service using the “language of story”.<sup>49</sup> Webber’s view on worship aligns somewhat with the church marketing movement during his conclusion. He states: “Fortunately, there is a trend today, particularly among the next generation of leaders, to return worship to the people.”<sup>50</sup>

Sally Morgenthaler offers the final defense in what she referred to as “emerging worship”. Her emphasis on worship is worship in a postmodern world. Her thesis concerning “emerging worship”: “There is one characteristic, however, that overshadows the rest and, as such, needs to be the beginning point for any serious reworking of corporate worship in the new millennium: a profound recognition of personal and societal brokenness.”<sup>51</sup> Her emphasis in worship is the brokenness of a society, as well as how to deliver what she refers to as a “realignment” in worship. She summarizes this “realignment” aspect of “emerging worship” this way:

In the practical realm, realignment means reinstating Creator-referenced, God-focused expressions. Emerging worship leaders see much of contemporary worship as “self-referencing” — focused on human perceptions, needs, feelings, and desires. While not denying the importance of those elements, emerging worship services strive to engage worshipers primarily with the person and the continuing works of God through Jesus Christ.<sup>52</sup>

She refutes the “genericness” of worship and would rather see worship experiences

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<sup>48</sup>. Basden, 175–76.

<sup>49</sup>. Ibid., 179–80.

<sup>50</sup>. Ibid., 183–85.

<sup>51</sup>. Ibid., 221.

<sup>52</sup>. Ibid., 223.

“emerge” from individuals themselves. She summarizes and concludes her discussion on “emerging worship” this way:

The question must be asked, what would worship look like without the generic wrapper? What would happen if we truly let worship experiences emerge from the people themselves — if we stopped trying to hit targets, stopped trying to conform ourselves to a theoretical demography, and simply let lived and living stories speak? This would be a brave move, indeed. A move out of worship planned in cubicles to worship planned in community; an escape from worship as music (most often, whatever the worship-music industry is dictating this month) to worship as a whole-person, indigenous encounter with God: visual, aural, tactile, kinetic, emotional, and cerebral.<sup>53</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Now that various scholars and their views concerning worship style and God have been discussed, how does one summarize and answer the above questions. Is there a biblical form of worshipping God? Does worship style matter to God? The biblical conclusion is that worship style does indeed matter to God. The worship style that God approves is the biblical style (or form) or worship that God has commanded and presented in Scripture. The discussion concerning the essence of worship as the focus on God, not on ourselves, as outlined by Reimers, is a solid and biblically-sound definition of the essence of worship. MacArthur affirms this truth by saying: “Many people foolishly believe God will accept anything offered by well-meaning worshipers. It is clear, however, that sincerity is not the test of true worship. All self-styled or aberrant worship is utterly unacceptable to God.”<sup>54</sup> Reimers also included a biblically-sound discussion on the various elements of true worship of God. MacArthur affirms the elements of worship that align with Scripture by stating: “The basis of the biblical rule for worship is the principle of sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. When it comes to worship, whatever the Scripture

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<sup>53</sup>. Basden, 230.

<sup>54</sup>. MacArthur, 190.

does not expressly command is forbidden.”<sup>55</sup> The dangers of deviant worship as outlined by Reimers are wise cautions for believers to listen to when approaching the worship of God. While most of the discussion concerning biblical worship and the dangers of deviant worship as concluded by Reimers stemmed from Old Testament passages, there was enough of a New Testament discussion by Reimers on the essence of true biblical worship. MacArthur affirms the caution of the dangers of deviant worship this way: “Scripture outlines at least four categories of unacceptable worship: worship of false gods, worship of the true God in a wrong form, worship of the true God in a self-styled manner, and worship of the true God with a wrong attitude. The God of the Bible is the only God, and He is a jealous God who will not tolerate the worship of another.”<sup>56</sup>

Piper’s arguments concerning that there are no guidelines as to the form of worship in the New Testament are somewhat weak, as Piper misses the mark on the interpretation of John 4. While Piper rightly states that worship is no longer tied to a particular physical location (such as the temple in Jerusalem), Reimers better expounds upon worshipping God in spirit and in truth in his exegesis of John 4. Piper’s comments on worshipping God stemming from the heart of the worshiper are accurate, and Reimers agrees with Piper in this manner. John MacArthur also affirms the important of the heart of the worshiper by stating:

By far the most subtle kind of false worship, more difficult to measure from outward appearances than any of the first three already mentioned, is the worship of the true God in the right way, with a wrong attitude. Even with the elimination of all false gods, all images of the true God, and all self-styled modes of worship, worship will still be unacceptable if the heart attitude is not right. True worship requires devotion of the whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>. MacArthur, 195.

<sup>56</sup>. Ibid., 192.

<sup>57</sup>. Ibid., 195.

Piper is accurate in his statement that worship is an every-day occurrence to the Lord. Worship does not merely end after the Sunday morning worship service. Reimer agrees with Piper in this manner as well. Another area in which Piper's argument is somewhat weak is his argument that worship is primarily receiving from God, whereas Reimers makes the argument that worship is primarily offered to God. While it is true that worshipers should come before God with a hunger for God and receive spiritual nourishment from God when worshipping God, worship is also focused ultimately on giving glory to God and the glory due God. Piper would likely agree with this assessment due to the fact that his book heavily touches on the ultimate glory of God and dedicates a chapter to the glory of God.

Finally, a few comments are to be made concerning Basden's volume in the *Zondervan Counterpoints Series*. While Basden impartially moderates the volume by stating that worship style does not matter to God (more precisely that all worship styles matter to God), each contributor presents a discussion concerning what the contributor believes to be the biblical style and form of worshipping God. Like any of the other *Zondervan Counterpoints Series*, the goal of this volume is to present multiple views and essentially come to a conclusion aligning one's view with one of the views presented. Unfortunately, the majority of the discussions of worship styles were more from a subjective approach on why each contributor feels such a worship style is the most biblical to them. Some contributors either caricatured opposing worship styles or stated that other worship styles did not address their personal needs as their preferred worship style. While there was some biblical and exegetical discussion, the biblical and exegetical discussion was more prevalent in the counter responses each wrote than in their original discussion. A more biblical discussion grounded in exegesis versus the more subjective discussion grounded in experience would have been more persuasive. Furthermore, a couple of areas were a little overall weak. Webber's discussion on returning to the people seems to counter the view presented by Reimers to return worship to a focus on God. Additionally, the "emerging church" also has fallen

into the pitfalls of embracing liberalism and reconstructionism, viewpoints which would have been wise to have addressed concerning the “emerging church”.<sup>58</sup>

God has addressed in His word the biblical standard by which worshipers are to worship Him: “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24) May all believers worship God with the right heart toward worship (in spirit) and in the proper style, form, and manner of worship that aligns with the truth of the Word of God.

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<sup>58</sup>. Larry D. Pettigrew, “Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 17, no. 2 (2006): 163–74.



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